BEHAVIOURAL SKILLS ACQUISITION AND MORAL COMPETENCE

DEVELOPMENT AMONG NIGERIAN YOUTHS

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ABSTRACT

This study reveals that the moral competence among youths in Nigeria could be developed through behavioural skills acquisition. Most of the youths' behaviour in Nigeria are inimical and dangerous for the health and mutual living of Nigerians which have generated serious concern in the society. The ability to do the right thing consistently requires a coordination of a desire to do the right thing, the will to do it, a disposition to keep on doing it, knowing how to do it and knowing the right thing to do. What is needed to do the right thing consistently is an interconnection among more sentiments (Awareness), moral strength, virtue, wisdom (knowledge base). It is the believe of this study that moral competence will lead to a vibrant, healthy, and developed society, through the behavioural skill acquisition provided for the youths. Youths can acquire these behavioural skills through skills training programmes that are based on psychological human behavioural principles. This training will be of good benefit if other stakeholders in the society are well involved and not just only schools.

KEYWORDS: Skills Acquisition, Behavioural Skills, Behaviour, Competence Development, Moral Competence

INTRODUCTION

The high level of moral laxity and various form of maladjusted behaviour being experienced today among Nigerian youths provide an insight to the assumptions that some behavioural skills may be lacking or are at the lower ebbs among the Nigerian youths.

Behaviour may be conceived as a way an individual acts or conducts himself/herself in relation to his environment. In order words, it is the way an individual acts towards people, society or objects. This can either be normal or abnormal depending on the society norms. The relative adjustability of a behaviour is contingent on several factors, including cultural norms, societal standards and moral values. Bada (2010) opined that behaviour can be adaptive or maladaptive. The behaviour that one puts on determines his/her moral and social lives; this may constitute a manifestation of his adjustment. The behaviour of a person may be determined by social experiences, values and expectations of individuals. The situation and the behaviour of youths in Nigeria calls for serious attention. Nigerian youths manifest intolerance, unempathetic approach towards one another which always mar peaceful relationship.

Behavioural skills training are critical to successful functioning in life. These skills may lead to an understanding of how to behave in diverse situation. The extent to which youths possess good social and moral skills seems to influence their academic performance, social, family relationships and their involvement in extra-curricular activities. The development of behavioural skills acquisition may include self control, empathy, assertiveness, stress tolerance, problem solving skills and other of youths, if they are well managed.

In most cases people tend to believe that effective prevention of maladjusted behaviour requires community agencies and programmes to provide guidance, and control performed. This is ideally and traditionally expected to be done by the family and by the force of social custom. Walsh (1990), perceived training aseducational process which will assist in the development of knowledge, mental ability, moral and social skills to achieve competence development.Bada (2010) observed that, essentially, the skill training may involve the development of vision, character and competence in young people. Huitt (2011), was of the opinion that skills training development among youths focus attention on three critical issues facing young people today such as: vision, competence and moral character. Huitt expatiated that, vision has to do with aspiration, dreams, goals, of what is possible and desirable to do. Competence concerns with the knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills that link to successful performance. Moral character deals with the habits of patterns of thinking, feeling, willing, and behaving that relate to right and wrong, to justice and equity and to morality and ethics. Therefore, behavioural skills training ought to be seen as an organic process in the development of the material/physical, human, psychological and spiritual/transcendental aspects of human being. Much important is that moral character is built upon, and must be integrated with, competencies developed in other domains.

According to Mustakovia-Possardt (2004), vision, competence and moral character are all related together for the development of total child and youth, which comes into reality through the skills acquired in line with behavioural skills training.

It is imperative that Nigerian schools develop interest in enhancing behavioural skills that can promote competence development of youths. This according to Harington (2012), is because, negligence of this, often results to underperformance in school achievements, leads to victims absent from school, run away from home, reduced self-esteem, anxiety, depression, sometimes suicidal ideations. Victims are often uninvolved in extracurricular school activities. The side effect of the problem of behavioural skills acquisition and moral competence among youths are much enormous that it calls for assistance of the schools, parents and the agencies of concern.

The domains of human potential that can facilitate the development of capacities into competencies is essential in this study and are discussed under:

Domains of Human Potentials for Competence Development

Competencies could be viewed as the realisation and actualisation of innate and inherited potentials, while virtues are considered as habitual use of those competencies. Huitt (2011), submitted that the core domain of moral competence development is self and self-views with other seven domains seen as specific aspects of that general domain, which are essential for moral competence development.

Three out of the seven domains are related to faculties of mind as identified in psychology, these includes:
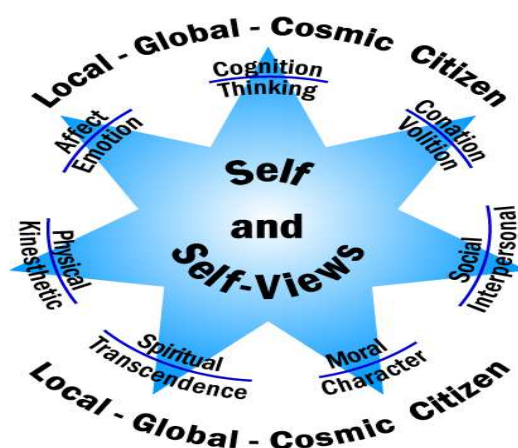
- Cognition (thinking, reasoning, rational intelligence)

- Affect (emotions, values, emotional intelligence) and

- Conation (will, volition, self-regulation)

Two domains refer to the remaining domains in describing human beings (i.e. mind, body, spirit):

- Body (physical, relation to nature), and

- Spirit (relates to the innate need of human beings to relate to self, others, and the ultimate unknown of the universe).

- Social refers to human relationships

- Moral character refers to the underlying qualities of a persons moral or ethical knowledge, attitudes, values and commitments, that are systematically displayed in one's behaviour. Character is associated with the quality of one's life, especially in terms of moral and ethical decisions and actions.

The framework is comprised of core domains plus the domain of citizenship as presented pictorially below:

Source: Huitt, W. (2011): The Brilliant Star Framework.

Educational Psychology Interactive

Figure 1

There are so many issues associated with citizenship or embraced into citizenship here, such as:

- Family (mate selection, spousal relationships, parenting)

- Friends (peer groups, interpersonal relations),

- Work and career (arts and profession),

- Wealth and finances (material wealth, sources of income, stewardship), and

- Social and cultural issues (such as world peace, unity of mankind e.t.c).

It is assumed that one is expected to develop moral competence from these domains. As presented earlier, one's self, self-views and personal style are considered central to learning and development in all domains. They are considered important to learning and acquisitions of the needed behavioural skills for moral competence development. In reality all the domains are connected to each other. The internal domains of physical, cognitive, affective, conative, spiritual, and moral character development interact with external domains of social and citizenship. For example, in adolescence, when one develop in the moral competencies necessary to start and maintain one's own life, external domains are heavily influenced by one's cognitive, emotional, and conative development. The reverse is also true; as one develops in the external areas, this impacts competency in one's internal domains such as problem solving strategies and values. Bronfenbrenner (1979)

in support of the brilliant star framework observed that the domains are developed in interaction with social and cultural influences. Putnam (2000), inferred that the interaction among the different people, beliefs, institutions and so on, form the social capital of the child that influences human competence development and behaviour.

Abrams and Primack (2011), therefore make case that cosmic citizenship should be the orientation that is taught to children and youth which will force everyone to recognise a personal connection not only to the earth, but to the entire cosmos. At first level are the family, the school, the religious organisation, and friends. At macro level, the influences include such areas as the culture, international region, and the global condition. These influences are filtered through the micro level influences.

Analysis of Behaviour System

A behaviour system analysis is a connection of interrelated factors that form a whole. This type of analysis is quite beneficial because, it is a level that includes all the major social institutions that influence behaviour development in young people, and not just schools. From the perspective of a system view, competence according to Huitt (1996) are in terms of three components of the mind (cognition, affect, volition). The cognitive development of behaviour consist of both a knowledge base of right and wrong as well as the rational and creative process necessary to work with the knowledge base in order to make sound moral decisions. Huitt (2004) submitted that behaviour could be influenced by knowledge base. Huitt and Hummel (1994) suggested that behaviour at another angle can be influenced by the application of consequences as described by operant conditioning theory and observation and modeling as described by social learning theory.

Huitt (2004) explained further that, once individual's form a knowledge base, they attach value to it, they think on it and esteem it. These, think and value component which they have established on the knowledge base will influence what they are willing to be committed to, and what they are willing to set goals for, make plan for and put energy towards accomplishing. Obviously, vision may set in here so as to know the target of accomplishment. It explains that a youths make these commitments and plans, it add to their knowledge base and strengthen their thinking skills and values. Huitt further clarified that, these three components (knowledge base, thinking, value and commitments), will then influence final component, that is overt behaviour in forms of social and moral behaviour. This behaviour has two aspects; personal virtues such as being courageous, self control, self confidence, self esteem, integrity; social virtue such as being compassionate, trustworthy, cooperative, empathic, helpful, and having respect for others. Huitt and Hummel (1994) using social learning theory of Bandura, explained that much of knowledge and values that (youths) students holds are obtained through observation, modeling and application of consequences. Another cognitive approach to this may be to engage students in discussion of relevant moral issues with the expectation that student who hear their peers discuss the issue from a higher level will move to that position. This position was expounded in the moral development approach of Lawrence Kohlberg. However, Wynne (1989), suggested that to effectively assist youths in acquiring desirable behavioural skills, there must be the quality of relationships among the institutions and adults in authority. In summary as parents, educators, religious organisations, and community members, we have an obligation to provide young people with training appropriate to their age level that would assist them in holding to the absolutes that are common across philosophies. At the same time the youths need to be helped in clarifying and defending their own acquired values.

Perceptions about Moral Competence Development

Moral development is one of the topics of interest to those who are curious about human nature. Most people have strong opinion about acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, ethical and unethical behaviours; Owuamanam and Owuamanam (2002) opined that moral development is the ability of a child to adhere to moral standards acceptable to him and to society. They explained that early in life the morality of the child is just to obey socially imposed rules. A child is conformed to rules and regulations of the group because of the reward for such moral behaviour, while non-conforming may attract punishment or disapproval, the fear of these are the reasons for moral behaviour. However, as the child gets older and mature in cognitive growth, the young person adopt principles, and internalizes personal standards for moral judgment. These are moral autonomy, which enable him to act in accordance with respect to justice, human right, and dignity than on self interest.

Moral competence development involves thoughts, behaviours and feelings regarding standards of right and wrong. Moral competence development according to Gibbs (2003), Walker and Pitts (1998) has an intrapersonal dimension (a person's basic values and sense of self) and an interpersonal dimension (a focus on what people should do in their interactions with other people). The intrapersonal dimension regulates a person's activities when she or he is not engaged in social interaction. The interpersonal dimension regulates peoples' social interaction and arbitrates conflict. Mischel and Mischel (1975), explained a distinction between youths moral competence – that is the ability to produce moral behaviours and moral performance – that is the enactment of those behaviours in specific situations by making use of social cognitive theory of moral development. Competence, include what the youths are capable of doing, what they know, their skills, their awareness of moral rule and regulation, and their cognitive ability to construct behaviours. In contrast, youths' moral performance, or behaviour is determined by their motivation, the rewards, and incentives to act in a specific moral way. This shows that moral competence is much involving, demanding and portrait of maturity.

Santrock (2005) perceived youth moral thought as how they think about the knowledge base they have about the standards of right and wrong. Santrock dwelling on the theories of Piaget and Kohlberg deduced that moral reasons can always be a shelter for maladjusted behaviours. For instance, cheaters and thieves may know what is right and wrong, yet still do what is wrong. In evaluating the relation between moral thought and moral behaviour, let's consider the corrupting power of rationalization and other defenses that disengage us from self-blame, these include interpreting a situation in our favour and attributing blame to authorities, circumstances or victims (Bandura 1991). In this process of moral justification, some immoral conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purpose. This argument seems to weaken the moral competence development of youths, that bothers on the skills that can promote moral characters like; truthfulness, self control, integrity, assertiveness, individual responsibility, empathy, humility, stress tolerance, justice, steadfastness, dependability and so on. Of course the indices of moral competence according to Jonsri, Kunaviktel, Ketatian and Chaowait (2005) are selected from basic values which include the attributes of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, responsibility, discipline, honesty, respect for human values, dignity and rights.

Some Identifiable Elements of Moral Competence

Matheison (2002), observed that moral competence is interwoven with social, emotional, and intellectual development, nevertheless all these are dependent on each other. The identifiable element here is to assist in chosen the lens of how to view who a moral competence person is. There are different conflicting criteria on the measurement of

moral competence in moral psychology. The idea of Berkovitz and Grych (1998) and Matheison (2002) were exclusively used as follows for the identification of the elements of moral competence.

- **Moral Agency and Identity:** Moral agency is of the opinion that people see themselves as having the right and ability to make decisions, and to act on them. The moral competent person has a high sense of self as a central human being. Hunter (1990), stressed that developing a sense of self and the authority of ones voice is essential. People whose identity is suppressed, such as woman in authoritarian cultures, or those that are emotionally or sexually abused may not think they have a right to choose their own opinions. As young people matures, there ought to be increasing ability to consider their own cognitive process. Their ownthinking becomes an object of thought, something to be understood, evaluated and improved upon. This may also help in the acquisition of assertive skill.

- **Harnessing Cognitive Ability:** The moral competent person is a person of high sense of logic and justice. He often uses this to decide what is fair and just to balance decisions when faced with moral dilemmas. Berkolvitz and Grych (1998) described the stages of natural development of such forms of justice logic, as moving from a calculation of self-interest to a calculation of social interest, to a reliance upon abstract universal logical principles of justice. Cognitive skills help people recognise conflicts and create new system of meaning. A well developed moral mind can better imagine the impact of various courses of action. This may as well help in the problem solving skills acquisition.

- **Harnessing Emotional Resources:** This appears to be the force behind all moral behaviours. It is the one that integrates and coordinates the knowledge and values of a moral person. Lickona (2000) opined that emotions are important in initiating and sustaining action resisting impulses which is a virtue of self- discipline, self control skills development, and it is critical to goal achievement. Mathieson (2002), paraphrased Aristotle, that morally competent persons know how to be angry with the right person at the right time for the right reason. We have various emotions such as empathy, sympathy, compassion, shame, guilt and others.

- **Social Skill Demonstration:** Morally competent people possess the skill to understand others, make themselves understood, and sometimes persuade others to adopt their own view point. Mathieson added, that such people can detect untoward social pressure applied to themselves and others. They can maintain their own commitment to their principle in the face of group pressure .This appears to be what assertive skills are trying to stress.

- **Using Principles:** Moral competence behaviour make people to be aware of the conflicts between principles that underline moral dilemmas. They understand the society standards and the relationships that bind societies together.

- **Moral Character and Respect for Others:** Moral character in the preview of Adebayo (2007) is a disposition of a morally competent person which is observable in character traits like honesty, kindness, responsibilities and respect for others. He added that such must be stable in their response to situation in moral ways. Blenky et al (1986) added that the disposition is also reflecting in "real talk" listening carefully, encouraging, exploring ideal, posing questions, arguing, speculating and sharing. In real talk, listening does not diminish ones capability to hear one's own moral voice.

- **Sense of Purpose:** A sense of purpose makes life worth living and death easier to bear. Colby and Damon (1995) observed that services to others are one of the more common life's missions among moral exemplars. Some people's commitment to others is an integral part of their identity, while service to a higher power is another recognisable life purpose, which may or may not entail service to others. However, purpose might be a way of life, a dedication to certain process rather than specific outcomes.

- **Meta-Moral Characteristics:** Adebayo (2007) noted that the competent moral person has certain attributes which may not be necessarily moral in nature but serve moral functions. Colby and Damon (1995), observed that such attributes may include: receptiveness to progressive social influence, positivism, humility, self-esteem, faith, and spirituality. Meta-moral characteristics are considered as psychological foundations for moral agency.

In conclusion, Mathieson (2002), reiterated that most people probably don't reach full competency during their life time. However, this image offers an end point to which youths can strive. They can recognise the elements of moral competence appreciate them and strive towards achieving them.

Pathway to Acquiring Behavioral Skills and Moral Competence Development

It is observed that many youths are being expelled and punished with different punishment strategies in schools, for various behavioural problems or the other, without any corresponding changes to such problems. Development of various behavioural skills is believed to be of good help in assisting the development of moral competence needed for productive life. This could be made possible through training. According to Huitt (2004), the training involves the development of vision, character and competence in young people. Richard, Berglund, Jeanne et al (1998), pointed out that the behavioural youth development construct of competence covers five areas of youth functioning, including social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and moral competencies. Therefore, programs are defined as promoting competencies, if they focus on building specific skills in these areas. Richard et al, were of the opinion that many competence promotion efforts have sought to develop skills to integrate feeling(emotional competence) with thinking (cognitive competence) and actions (behavioural competence), in order to help the child achieve specific goals. Therefore, behavioural skills training are instruction conducted in behavioural areas that promote more productive or positive interaction with others.

Many of these programs failed to accomplish the expected results because according to Huitt (2011), they focus on only one goal (e.g. high academic test scores or character development) to the exclusion of other important issues such like, emotional stability or self control. In addition, the foundation of programmes has been based on a limited range of principle from philosophy or science. The programmes may not be founded on the best research information from scientific investigations. Fundamental truths offered by spiritual or religious teachings of the major world religious, philosopher, historical figures, authors, artists and others important sources were perhaps neglected. Therefore Richard et al (1998), submitted that, strategies to promote positive bonding with all these important sources combined with the development skills have proven to be an effective intervention for youth at risk for antisocial behaviour. The importance of bonding extends far beyond the family. The child needs to establish early good and effective interaction with the immediate family which will directly affect the manner in which the child later relates to peers, school, the community, and culture(s). In discussing modes of acquiring behavioural skills for moral competence development, theorist like Bandura (1977) supported by Owuamanam (2003) are of the opinion that skills acquisition can be acquired through modeling and observation of others and training of the desired skills. National Professional Development Centre on Autism Spectrum Disorders (2008) buttress this point that, imitation is considered a critical milestone in the development because it is central

to understanding a sense of self and others and allows individuals to sustain social interactions. Imitation is often closely associated with play, which promotes socio-moral and communication skills, as well as cognitive skills. National Professional Development Centre (2008) suggested that when designing intervention programmes for youths with behavioural problems, a number of factors must be considered. Current level of functioning, as well as individual strengths and needs, families' concerns and priorities, constraints and supports of current learning and living environments are some of the issues that must be considered when planning intervention.

The National Association of School Psychologist (2002) pointed out that effective behavioural skills programme comprised of two essential elements, which are; a teaching process that uses a behavioural learning approach or a set of steps that facilitates the learning of the new skills. Interventions can be implemented at a school-wide, specific setting, classroom, or individual level, but at all levels, the emphasis is on teaching the desired skill, not punishing negative behaviour. The National Professional Development Centre (2008) added that, most behavioural skill group meetings include instruction (teaching), role playing or practice, feedback. In their further contribution, they added that behavioural skills training groups can target the skills like: perspective-tagtaking, conversation skills, friendship skills, problem-solving, socio-moral competence, emotion recognition. In addition specific interaction skills such as tolerance, responding, maintaining, assertiveness, greeting, giving/accepting compliments, turn taking, sharing, self control, asking for help, offering help could be targeted. The National Association of School Psychologists summarily made these suggested intervention programmes for behavioural skills acquisition, which should:

- Focus on facilitating the desirable behaviour and also to remove the undesirable ones.

- Place emphasis on learning, performance, generalisation and maintenance of appropriate behaviours through modeling, coaching and role playing.

- Use primary positive strategies and add punitive strategies only if the positive approach is unsuccessful and the behaviour is dangerous in nature.

- Provide training and practice opportunities in a wide range of settings with different groups and individuals in order to encourage students to generalise new skills to multiple and real life situations.

- Device assessment strategies for identifying those who will need more intensive interventions.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It can be concluded that the youths high level of moral laxities appears to be a great reference point to their deficiency in behavioural skills acquisition and moral competency development. In developing some behavioural skills like self control, empathy, assertiveness, stress tolerance, and problem solving skills, moral competence development is highly essential. It enhance the ability to produce moral behaviour and performance. Moral competence are being operated and developed on some domains of human potentials but centrally on self and self-views. Therefore, behavioural skills acquisition and moral competence development involves training that covers areas of youth functioning such as social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and moral character. Such training programmes will be result oriented if it focus on building specific skills in these areas. Some training programmes failed probably because they focus on only one goal and also that their principles were based on a limited range of principle which may not be based on the best research information from scientific investigation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Moral competence skills acquisition is very useful for youths to live a fulfilled life that will read meaning to themselves and the entire society. Behavioural skill acquisition and moral competence development training programme must involve teaching the whole skills that encompass cognitive, emotional and conative development. It should not be taught in isolation by the school but with the connection of the parents, religious organisations and other relevant agents. Relevant behavioural psychological principles must be borne in mind. More so, the trainers should identify the basic behavioural skills that the beneficiaries of the programme will need in order to align the skills training to their areas of deficiencies. Assessment strategies should be devised for evaluation and to also identify those who will need more intensive intervention and the areas where they will need it. The trainers of these skills should inculcate modeling and imitation methods into the training programme. When designing skills training programmes, the individuals (the trainers) strengths, needs, families concerns and priorities, constraints, living environments are some of the issues that should be considered when planning the programme. Youths need to be helped in clarifying and defending their own acquired values, this will help in affording imposition of values on them.

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